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# The Balloonist Dreams of Flight

## **Abstract**

...As a boy Henrik is given a book full of woodcut images that tell the story of Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier, the world's first balloonist. The book gives brief snippets of Rozier's life, first describing the process he went through to create his first balloon, and it ends with him flying high in the air....

## **Cover Page Footnote**

"The Balloonist Dreams of Flight" was originally published at [Booth](#).



November 21, 2014

## The Balloonist Dreams of Flight

Fiction by LaTanya McQueen

**H**is name is Henrik Von Kloppstraussen. Henrik has lived his entire life in Mettlach, a small town near the French border. He's lived with his father, a shoemaker, in a small countryside house at the top of a hill. Henrik's mother died shortly after he was born, and so he's never known her. His father is a mild-mannered man used to the solitary work of constructing and repairing shoes. Because of this, Henrik too has learned to be solitary, instead spending his days after school reading in his books or drawing pictures.

As a boy Henrik is given a book full of woodcut images that tell the story of Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier, the world's first balloonist. The book gives brief snippets of Rozier's life, first describing the process he went through to create his first balloon, and it ends with him flying high in the air.

Left out of the story is what happened during Rozier's last attempt at flying. He had a plan to cross the English Channel, and, while more than 1,500 feet in the air, the wallpaper of the balloon's envelope got wet because of the weather, and the balloon deflated. Rozier and his flight companion, Pierre Romain, fell to their deaths.

Henrik rubs his fingers over the images. He rips one of the woodcuts, an image of Rozier, from the book. He places it in his sweater pocket where, he feels, he'll remember.

*Pictures first—crayon swirls of color circling round and round.*

## II.

On television every year the news broadcasts the world ballooning festival. In France, the country where Rozier flew, there's a festival held in his name. Balloonists come from all over the world to fly, each of them sailing the path Rozier began but never finished.

Hypnotized, Henrik watches as hundreds of balloons color the air. Seeing them has cemented the dream in his heart. He will grow up to be a balloonist, and one day, if he is lucky, he will take part in the festival like all the men on the television.

Henrik points to the screen so that his father can see, but he is not paying attention. Instead his father's huddled over their breakfast table, eating a bowl of creamed oats. He's in a hurry to start his workday, to get on with it so it can be over. He doesn't look up when Henrik says his name.

"Look, look. It's magic," Henrik says to his father, who then tells him to shush.

*Pencil etchings on notebook paper, his fingers dirtied with charcoal. Black smudges smeared into shapes. Doodles in the margins of books. The outline of a figure, waving.*

## III.

Henrik has nightmares of Rozier falling. He pictures Rozier in the basket, now tumbling, tumbling tumbling, getting closer to the bottom, closer to the ocean that will swallow him whole. Henrik wakes, his mouth tasting of salt, and he has to remind himself that what he's tasting is not the salty lick of the ocean but his own sweat.

When Henrik dreams, it is of his mother, although he has never known her. Them together in a park. She has a package filled with balloons. She tears the package with her teeth, opening it, and dumps the unfilled balloons onto the grass. One after the

other she picks them up, pressing the latex to her lips, blowing, and as the air passes from her lips the balloon fills. The end is twisted and the balloon is twisted, twisted to form the shapes of animals. Here a dog, a poodle with puffs. Here, a hat and a sword. A flower with two balloons twisted together.

She throws each one in front of her, and for a few brief seconds they seem to float in the air and Henrik wonders, each time, why they don't fly.

*Still with fingers, folding. Folded paper sharply creased. Paper-cut fingers, the skin spliced and broken. Blood-dripped splatters on paper, coloring it red. Folding and folding and tucking until a shape forms. A ball.*

#### IV.

The first balloons were made from animal intestines, dried in the sun and stitched to seal. Cats, then humans. Aztecs set them on fire as a sacrifice to the gods.

Then came jesters, jesting with the entrails of the butchered. They filled them with water, watched as the casing expanded.

When the sheep is slaughtered, Henrik saves the bladder. He cleans it, sets it outside to dry.

His father watches him sit at the table with a needle and thread.

"What are you doing?" his father asks.

"Practicing," Henrik tells him, but doesn't say what for.

"You're practicing?" his father says, and waits for confirmation, and Henrik tells him yes.

His father looks at the intestine, at the needle and thread in his son's arms, and nods. The image has convinced him of what he has always wanted for his son. He'll be a doctor. He'll be successful and happy. He will not grow up alone.

*With his hands he learns to manipulate. Here is one shaped like a dog. Here, a sword. Another two are twisted together to form a flower. He imagines the possibilities and makes them.*

*His father catches him one day in his room. A hundred balloon animals scattered across the floor. His father picks one up, presses it between his hands—POP.*

*POP pop*

## V.

Despite his passion, Henrik listens to his father. Over the years he slowly begins to put away his childhood books of flying. Stories that once filled his daydreams now collect dust in cardboard boxes. One day he forgets where he's placed the woodcut of Rozier and loses it. When Henrik is older, his father tells him to go to medical school, and he does. He becomes a doctor because that's what his father felt was necessary. He becomes all that his father wanted him to be, but despite this he lives alone because he's unhappy and doesn't want someone else to be filled with the same despair that has contaminated his heart.

One day Henrik gets a call from his father telling him to come home. It's been years, and Henrik can count on his hand the number of times they've spoken. When he arrives home, he notices his father's frailty. His father shuffles instead of walks. His movements are slow and deliberate.

"My boy," his father smiles as he holds out his arms for his son.

Henrik learns that his father is sick, that he is dying of a rare heart defect. Henrik asks whether there's anything he can do.

"No, nothing," his father mumbles. "My son, a doctor, and he can't even save me."

"I'm sorry," Henrik says.

"No, I'm sorry." His father reaches into his pocket and pulls out the old woodcut of Rozier. He places it in Henrik's palm. "I'm sorry I took this from you."

*Balloons made with latex. Rubber. Mylar. Each having the slow life cycle that ends with it slowly sinking to his bedroom floor.*

*Helium. String.*

## VI.

When his father dies, Henrik doesn't cry. He makes all the necessary arrangements to bury him. The day of the service, the sun blinds. The air feels crisp and light. As the eulogy ends, Henrik looks up at the sky and thinks of how beautiful it is—as perfect a day as any he could have imagined.

“This was your doing,” Henrik whispers. The casket is lowered, and he smiles, suddenly understanding, and in the morning Henrik sets to work. He creates a single-partition basket, for he is to sail alone. He decides to use a combination of hot air and helium to lift his balloon. It takes him years to save enough money and gather the materials to finish.

Because he's not the boy he once was, his body aches from the work. The beginnings of arthritis have crept into his bones. Mornings, the tingling pain in his joints wakes him from slumber.

Perhaps, he fears, he will not make his journey, but he will start it, and at this stage of his life it is enough.

*One basket made of ash from the bark of trees, peeled from the log into long strips.*

*Envelope, made from weaving nylon, coated with a silicone to seal.*

*A single-unit propane burner.*

*Fuel. Netting.*

*A parachute—the fail-safe. Just in case.*

## VII.

Still, Henrik dreams. It is the same one he's had since he was a boy—Henrik in his balloon, the world below fading as he rises higher in the sky. The balloon cuts through the clouds, drifting farther from his home, farther from anything he's ever known. The air nips at his ruddy cheeks. His skin tingles from excitement.

From inside his coat pocket he takes the woodcut of Rozier that he's kept and, looking at it one last time, throws it into the air. He watches it flutter. As Henrik's balloon lifts higher, the distance between them grows. He continues watching as it slowly begins to fall until at last it's disappeared.

LaTanya McQueen received her MFA from Emerson College and is currently in the PhD program at the University of Missouri. Her stories have been published in *North American Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, *New Orleans Review*, *Nimrod*, *Potomac Review*, and others. Her story "Leopardia" was recently published as an e-book and is available for purchase on her website [www.latanyamcqueen.com](http://www.latanyamcqueen.com).